

EQUALITY NOW

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Lord Justice Leveson
The Leveson Inquiry
Royal Courts of Justice
Strand
London
WC2A 2LL

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Dear Lord Justice Leveson

We write from Equality Now, an international human rights organisation working to protect and promote the rights of women and girls around the world. We are pleased to make this submission to the Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press and particularly issues relating to the press and the public, specifically women.

As a human rights organisation, Equality Now greatly values freedom of expression and champions its continuance. We witness daily how the brave voices of those exposing abuse, many of them journalists, help hold all our governments and others accountable for human rights violations. They need the freedom to bring these issues to light without fear of persecution or prosecution. We also cherish freedom in society generally to have informed debate about issues where all can share their views. We wholeheartedly support a free and diverse press.

Those of us who strongly protect the right to freedom of expression must not, however, use it to defend everything that is spoken or written. As is already recognised in the United Kingdom, freedom of expression is not an absolute right. When it silences or otherwise infringes upon the rights and freedoms of others, its importance in principle must be balanced against its effects in reality. The widespread objectification and sexualisation of women in the UK press represents just such an infringement on the rights of women and girls, normalising and promoting stereotypical and often subordinate roles of women, promoting their second class status in society.

In its Concluding Observations of the UK's compliance with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2008, the CEDAW Committee noted "with concern the stereotyped media portrayals of women and women's roles in the family and in society, which contribute to women's disadvantaged position in a number of areas, including in the labour market and in access to decision-making positions, and affect women's choices in their studies and professions." The Committee further noted "the lack of positive media portrayals of ethnic and minority women, elderly women and women with disabilities."

The Concluding Observations continued:

> The Committee recommends [to the UK government] that policies be strengthened and programmes implemented, including awareness-raising and educational campaigns directed at women and men, and specifically at media and advertising agencies, to help ensure the elimination of stereotypes regarding the roles of women and men in society and in the family, in accordance with articles 2 (f) and 5 (a) of the Convention. It also recommends that the media be encouraged to project a positive image of women, including ethnic and minority women, elderly women and women with disabilities, and to promote the value of gender equality for society as a whole. It calls upon the State party to review periodically the measures taken in order to assess their impact, to take appropriate action and to report thereon to the Committee in its next periodic report."[1]

In its General Recommendation No 19, the CEDAW Committee states that such traditional views of women perpetuate widespread practices involving violence or coercion and that such prejudices and practices may be used to justify gender-based violence as a form of protection or control of women. The Committee further explains how such violence deprives women of the equal enjoyment of their rights and contributes to their lesser participation in public life.

Several studies have offered theories to explain how the sexualisation of girls and women could negatively affect society as a whole as well as women and girls specifically. These include "an increase in sexism; fewer girls pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM); increased rates of sexual harassment and sexual violence; and an increased demand for child pornography."[2] Others list self-destructive behaviours such as eating disorders and self-harm, along with anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.[3]

Women and girls in the UK are bombarded with stereotyped images through the media on a daily basis. If similar treatment were routinely meted out to a specific group based on religion, race or sexual orientation, it would not be tolerated. The fact that it is permitted and rarely even acknowledged as an abuse in the UK is a strong indication of how deeply pervasive and accepted such stereotypes of women are.

The right to freedom of expression carries with it special duties and responsibilities, as acknowledged by the UK government when it agreed to be bound by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). According to Article 19.3(a) of the ICCPR, which is further elaborated by the Human Rights Committee in its General Comment No 34, "respect for the rights or reputation of others" is a legitimate ground for restricting the right of freedom of expression contained in Article 19.2 of the ICCPR, provided that this restriction is carefully construed.

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[1]Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; Forty-first session 30 June – 18 July 2008 (CEDAW/C/UK/CO/6)
[2]American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2010). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf
[3]See for example *Getting Real: Challenging the Sexualisation of Girls*, Melinda Tankard Reist (ed), (Spinifex 2009)

In its General Comment No 34, the Human Rights Committee states that the term “others” relates to “other persons individually or as members of a community. Thus it may, for instance, refer to individual members of a community defined by its religious faith or ethnicity.” It is Equality Now’s position that “community” could also be applied to the community of “women” and that, as such, the UK government has an obligation to protect the rights of women as a community as well as individual women intimidated or otherwise harmed by the press.

The UK government is bound by international law, including CEDAW, both to pursue the elimination of discrimination against women and to ensure women’s full advancement on a basis of equality with men so that women may be guaranteed full enjoyment of their human rights. In its General Recommendation No 19, the CEDAW Committee specifically recommended that “[e]ffective measures should be taken to ensure that the media respect and promote respect for women”. This should at a minimum include the full use of tools and mechanisms already in place in the United Kingdom to regulate harmful materials. The Committee further recommended that “[e]ffective measures should be taken to overcome [attitudes, customs and practices that perpetuate violence against women]. States should introduce education and public information programmes to help eliminate prejudices that hinder women’s equality.” Equality Now echoes these recommendations and respectfully asks the Leveson Inquiry to enumerate both of these in its own recommendations to government.

We look forward to a successful inquiry and concrete recommendations that will address in earnest the underlying sex inequality highlighted in this letter.

Thank you for your attention.

Jacqueline Hunt
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